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Cape Cod National Seashore Releases Carns Site Archeological Report

The National Park Service is pleased to announce that the publication, *Archeological Investigations at the Carns Site, Coast Guard Beach, Cape Cod National Seashore, Massachusetts*, 2005, authored by Dr.

James Bradley of ArchLink, has been completed and will be available to the public at Cape Cod National Seashore and local libraries. A nominal fee of \$5.00 will be charged for the one volume report that will be on sale at the Eastern National bookstore, at Salt Pond Visitor Center, in Eastham. The report is the culmination of sixteen months of archeological fieldwork conducted in the early 1990s near Coast Guard Beach in Eastham, which surveyed more than 300 square meters of a significant Early and Middle Woodland period site dating from 2,100 to 1,100 years ago. This period is poorly understood, and the Carns site represents an important contribution to our knowledge of Cape Cod history.

The intriguing story of the Carns Site began in 1990 on the day after Thanksgiving. A powerful storm had caused significant coastal erosion, and National Park Service archeologists were called in to salvage what was believed to be an exposed prehistoric hearth located in the bluff at the high tide line on Coast Guard Beach in Eastham. The site was named after the person who located the hearth. Initial salvage work began in November and December, followed by additional field work the following February and May 1991.

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In a dramatic series of digs, the archeologists raced against bitter winter storms and an eroding beach. In addition to the prehistoric hearth or “fire pit” that had been found, archeologists uncovered two other “fire pits with pottery,” post molds, linear plowscars from historic period farming, shell concentrations, and deep and shallow dark stains. Radiocarbon dates were taken from the original hearth that was lined with fire-cracked rock and contained chunks of charcoal. Stone projectile points, and other stone tools had been manufactured on the site, suggesting that these areas of the beach had been occupied by native peoples who had set up small camps there. The ceramics that were recovered in these excavations were from at least 11 different vessels.

Following several other gales that caused severe coastal erosion, new sections of archeological site were revealed. Archeologists worked periodically until March 1992, and used remote sensing and larger test units to identify the site’s boundaries. Five more ceramic vessels, and numerous projectile points, reinforced the fact that the area tested at this time was contiguous to the area first excavated, and that cultural evidence from this work could shed much information about the lives of native peoples who had lived far inland from the coastal beachfront that had existed 2000 years earlier. After the fieldwork was completed, work has been ongoing at the National Park Service’s archeology lab in Lowell, MA, to analyze and catalogue the extensive collection from the excavation. The collection consists of 65 boxes of artifacts, 25 boxes of field notes and related documentation, and nearly 300 boxes of soil samples. The collection will be returned to Cape Cod National Seashore once proper storage space is prepared.

In Dr. Bradley’s introduction, he points out why the Carns site is so important to understanding Cape Cod history: “This was a time of change, environmentally and culturally. It was a period of climatic fluctuation with a shift from colder than present to warmer than present conditions. Rising sea level slowed, stabilized and began to create the landscape of salt marshes and estuaries that characterizes the Cape today. Not surprisingly, it was also a time of cultural transition.

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Evidence suggests that new ideas, technologies and even people moved into New England from population centers in the Ohio valley during this period. These new technologies included the widespread use of pottery, and the introduction of the bow and arrow. The advent of cultigens, especially corn (maize) and beans, also may have occurred during this interval. This dynamic period is best represented at the Carns site.”

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